



Harvest December series

GIFTING FEBRUARY

[Winter]

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Prologue

I recalled the memory of his hands.

I had developed a habit of looking at my palms whenever I had the time.

They were a little bit dry and worn from all the work I did daily in the kitchen, even though I took care to moisturize often.

Accumulation. That is what it was. Doing the same thing every day, little by little, changed something.

It couldn't be helped.

Once I noticed the change had happened, there was nothing I could do.

I thought of the large hand that had held my own.

It hurt a little, and was so warm.

I kept thinking of how it felt at that moment.

But the memory was fading gradually. Washed away by the tides of time.

"No..."

I didn't want to forget.

I pressed my face into my palms, as if to absorb whatever heat was left into my cheek.

I took a moment to savor it and gathered my thoughts.

"I've got to do this."

I stood up.

The physical memory would fade eventually.

I could accept that, but...

I burst out of my room and ran down the stairs.

The first floor of Sanae's was partly the eatery, and the other part was my home.

I could smell the sweet and tangy aroma of fish being braised in a special sauce.

It was almost time to open for the evening.

I made my way towards the familiar clinking sounds of beer bottles rattling together. I knew he would be stacking the beer cartons.

I ran out of the back door to meet him.

"Sanae?" Masaki Konno looked my way carrying a plastic carton of beer in his arms. His breath was white from the cold February air.

He had delicate features that looked younger than his years and a pretty face that gained him popularity among the senior girls.

He tilted his head inquiringly.

"I'm in love."

He dropped the beer carton he was carrying, his friendly expression still frozen on his face.

I could accept the physical memory fading away, but I had decided I would refresh it again and again with that very same hand whenever

I needed it.

The beer bottles crashed by my feet.

That was my signal gun.

Discussions again

It took around ten minutes to clean up the beer bottles I had dropped.

By the time I got back to the front door, the noren for Sanae's was up.

It was time to open shop.

"Masaki-kun..." Sanae said. She was sitting by the counter, alone.

We had no customers yet.

"What was that sound?" Sanae's mother, Yumi, asked from the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, it was an accident. Do you mind if Sanae and I take a day off work today?" I asked.

"I don't, but it won't be paid leave."

"That'll be fine," I said as I took my seat beside Sanae.

".....Hmmm? Well, you two are welcome to order whatever you want."

Yumi looked at me, then at her daughter, who had her eyes downcast, and gave me a nod.

She didn't ask any questions.

"I'm counting on you, young man!" she whispered and disappeared to the back.

I pulled the menu towards me to mull.

"I've got to go help with the kitchen!" Sanae finally said.

"Do you realize what you look like now?" I asked.

"Hmmm?"

"Go look in the mirror."

It would be easier for her to see for herself.

She popped into the back, and after a while:

"EEK!!"

"OOH!"

"AAW!!"

There was a wide repertoire of exclamations, and then she came back.

Sanae had turned beet red after her confession, and had stayed that way since.

She looked like a terrified girl just about to jump off a cliff, but at the same time, happy and excited.

Between the fear and excitement, she also looked like she was on the brink of crying.

"Masaki-kun, um, I..." she stammered.

"You can't work in such a state," I said, looking away.

It felt awkward to keep looking at someone so obviously embarrassed.

"Reality is merciless." I mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Let's talk, after you calm down a little."

I flipped through the drinks menu.

"Aren't you going to add coffee to the menu?" I asked.

"We've got coffee flavored milk, if you want that," she said.

"It's not the same."

"Will tea be alright?" Yumi-san asked, obviously eavesdropping.

She slid two cups of steaming green tea before us in perfect timing.

"Besides Masaki-kun, you're the only person in this town that would ask for something fancy like coffee."

"It's not fancy."

"Oooh, city boy talking!" she teased.

"No, I didn't mean it that way!"

I sipped my tea and instantly felt better.

"Regarding Kouhei..." I began.

"EEK!!" Sanae squeaked.

"...Drink your tea first," I said, pressing her cup into her hands.

I waited until she finished it.

"Phew."

"Better?" I asked.

"Um... yeah."

"For a moment, when you made your confession, I thought you were declaring your love to me." I laughed. She was actually trying to tell me that she was in love with Kouhei.

"Oh, I'm sorry! But..."

"Hmm?"

"Were you secretly happy about that?" she asked, grinning cheekily.

"Wha-!?" I stammered. "Um... n-no comment."

"Ooooh you're taking your loyalty to Yuki seriously!"

"No, I'm taking my physical wellbeing and life expectancy seriously."

"Are you that afraid of her naginata, Kubikirimaru?" Sanae teased. "Whatever happened to that edgy, Masaki Fearless Konno attitude you had when you first came from Tokyo?"

"Look, I turned this way because of you guys and your evil machinations."

"Well, looking at your growing popularity, I suppose your meek and obedient side is doing it for the girls too," Sanae snickered.

"Someone did say that a broken-in married man is easier to handle."

"No!! I don't want to hear this manipulative girl talk!!" I covered my ears.

I wanted to shout my frustration at the fact that lately, everybody seemed to behave as if Yuki and I were already married.

"Anyway, why did you want to confess it to me?" I asked.

"I thought you would be the person that could give me the most unbiased opinion and advice," she said.

"I thought you'd want some warm, empathetic advice."

"Do you really think Mizuho and Yuki will be able to give me good advice?"

"Um," I paused for a moment to think of what Mizuho would say:

"You don't mind getting together with Oni-chan? Hallelujah!! His feet stink and he thinks about naked women all day, but I hope that's not too much of a problem. Please, take him away!! Oh, but please send him home whenever it's harvest season, we'll need him to reap the rice."

And what Yuki might say:

"What are you doing waiting around then? Just go and ask him out right now!"

Yeah...

"Hey, remember to invite to the wedding dinner! Just the dinner is fine, I want the food. Preferably French. Oh, but I won't have enough cash to give you your Oshugi, hee hee!!"

Wha-? Why the hell did my mom show up just now? What's going on with my brain?

In any case, they wouldn't be much help at all.

"So I thought you'd be the best person to give me the calm outsider's perspective," Sanae said.

"Because I am the outsider," I said quietly.

"Hey! That's not what I meant!" Sanae glared at me with a pout.
"You're one of us! I just meant that I needed your calm eye!"

"Sorry." I reminded myself that I now belonged to this land.

Two months ago, Yuki, Kouhei, Mizuho, and Sanae took me in as one of them.

"You're forgiven." She puffed out her chest with a nod. She was wearing her casual clothes today, and what I saw was pretty impressive.

"Oh-ho? You just gave me the once-over, didn't you?" she said, narrowing her eyes. "You can't hide that, I noticed! I wonder what Yuki would say?"

"When did you fall in love with Kouhei?" I asked.

I dropped the bomb.

Target Sanae, went silent instantly.

"Two months ago, something happened and made you cross the line from being just friends, didn't it?"

"Do I really have to tell you?" Sanae asked meekly.

"No, you don't."

"Well, it happened this way..."

"Oh, so you ARE going to tell me."

"Remember when we left you and Yuki together at the shrine?"
Sanae ignored my snide remark and kept talking.

It was two months ago, but I remembered it like it was yesterday. It wasn't something you could easily forget.

Yuki and I were trapped in Tagami shrine during a blizzard and we almost froze to death.

"We were caught in the blizzard too, while we were making our way down."

"I didn't know that."

"He held my hand," she said softly.

"Kouhei did that?"

"Yeah, and I didn't feel scared anymore. I wasn't afraid of dying or never seeing any of you again. I just forgot all about that."

"That's it?"

"Isn't that reason enough?" Sanae asked.

I honestly didn't know.

"Have you heard of something called the suspension bridge effect?" I asked.

"Isn't that the theory that when two people are in danger, they confuse the feeling of fear and their rapid heartbeats to those of excitement and love... hey! Are you trying to say I'm just imagining my feelings!?"

"Hey, don't get mad at me!" I protested. "Isn't this the type of rational explanation you wanted to hear from me?"

"No!" Sanae snapped. "You were supposed to say something warm and empathetic there!"

"That's not what you said before." I sighed. "Alright then, fill me in with more information about the two of you then. After all, I'm still new around here."

"Urgh, I hate it when you say stuff like that," Sanae grumbled. "But since it's true, I'll let it slide!"

I quickly spun around. I could see all the customers that had gathered in the eatery look away awkwardly at the same time.

All the nosy people were aching for entertainment and were obviously waiting for the next hot topic for gossip. I pressed my temples, feeling a headache coming on.

"You fell in love with him when he held your hand?" I asked.

".....No," Sanae lowered her eyes. "I've always loved him."

She looked so sure of herself. I had to look away. It wasn't easy to stare at somebody that was professing their love with such conviction.

I stared at my cup of tea that had gone lukewarm.

"You haven't told anyone?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure Mizuho-chan knows."

"And Yuki?"

"Yuki is a loyal friend, but she's got tunnel-vision." Sanae explained.

Before I came to Tagami, Sanae must have been the one in the group that served as the person with the 'outsider's perspective'. She spoke slowly, and often was cheeky and said the darndest things, but her observations were usually spot on.

"You didn't want to threaten the relationship you already had?"

"Yeah." She admitted it easily.

It was common to hear of people ending a friendship because of romantic feelings within the group.

Kouhei wanted to be her friend, so she continued their relationship that way rather than risk losing him.

Which was why she was so afraid.

"But now you want to take it to the next level?"

"Well, it's actually because of you Masaki-kun. You gave me hope."

"Huh?"

"You're dating Yuki right? Albeit in a different sort of way."

"Yeah."

"But did that stop us all from being friends?"

"No." I shook my head. "Nothing changed."

"So I thought maybe I could do that too."

"But that may be because I was new here. So it was easy for me to start a new kind of relationship."

I knew what I said might hurt her, or shake her confidence. But I also knew it was something she had to consider carefully before she made a move.

"You've had a pretty tight relationship as friends for such a long time. If you try to change that, it might break the foundation of trust in the relationship you've built so far entirely. You do know that, right?" I pressed again.

"Yeah, I've thought of that too."

I kept quiet and waited for her answer.

Sanae had her head down, her forehead pressed into her right hand.

Destruction always comes from within.

The finer a system was made and tuned to perfection, the bigger the disruption would be if a change was made.

"But I can't forget the feeling of his hands."

"You're willing to risk it?"

I didn't enjoy playing the devil's advocate in this. Why was I always the unlucky guy that had to be the mean one?

I wondered whether I could risk something to lose a friend like Sanae myself.

I probably could. I was cold like that.

But Sanae probably couldn't stand it.

"Can you?" I asked simply.

"I'm scared, but I want this!" She said in a tiny but firm voice.

It was a vow, the answer to her test of courage.

"So, what do you intend to do?" I began to ask the more practical questions.

"That's what I wanted your opinion on." Sanae lifted her head to look at me.

She was smiling now, with a look of determination on her face.

I was probably the last person she should ask when it came to romantic ideas.

But this time, it was different.

"Look at the calendar."

This time, the world was on our side.

Sanae glanced at the calendar nearby.

"Of course!"

I was sure she was looking at the exact same date I was looking at.

"The Setsubun mochi festival!" she exclaimed.

"Wha-? No! Valentine's Day!"

"Oh! That makes more sense."

"I'll do what I can to help you," I said.

"Thank you."

We stared at the calendar in silence for a moment.

Two weeks from now.

It would be St. Valentine's Day.

Council of War

5th of February.

Our notoriously anti-curriculum math teacher talked for an entire hour about Quolia, and left the classroom as soon as the bell rang.

It was just past mid-day in the afternoon. Everyone began taking their bento boxes out. Some students headed out to buy some food.

It was lunch time.

Around me was the usual team:

Kouhei, Mizuho, Sanae, and-

"Masaki! they had good Tai fish in the market today, so I've tried cooking it in a sweet sauce," Yuki Towada said, hugging her large two-tiered bento box to her chest.

If it were any other day, we would push our desks together so we could sit in a circle and have our lunch. And I would have to endure Yuki's "Say Ah-" torture (Which, to my horror, was beginning to become enjoyable).

However...

"Sergeant Sanae!" I barked.

"Sir, yes Sir!" she replied instantly.

Today I had other plans.

I stood up with enough force to send my chair skidding backwards.

"I will brief you on our mission for today! Follow me!"

"Sir, yes Sir!"

Ignoring the curious eyes of our peers, Sanae and I cut through the classroom and headed towards the exit with great determination.

"Masaki!" Yuki groaned behind me.

"Sorry, next time!" I called back.

Opening the door, we hurriedly went outside.

"Masa-..."

And before anybody could follow, I slammed the door shut.

"...ki?" Yuki's hand was stretched out toward the closed door.

"Um..." Mizuho murmured as she slowly unwrapped the furoshiki of her bento box. Her fingers moved awkwardly, uncertainly.

"I can't eat all of this alone," Yuki sighed as she looked down at the box she was holding in her hands.

"What was that about?" Kouhei asked.

If only he knew.

Sanae and I made our way to the library.

It was packed with senior students studying for their entrance exams.

For the 3rd year students, the second half of the school day was mostly free study time. Students were allowed to spend their time studying subjects they needed work on wherever they liked, if they didn't have any more classes to attend.

Eating and drinking in the library was usually against school regulations, but during this season an exception was made. It was

the school's way to provide a place for students to relax, to exchange information, chat and study.

Which was why...



"Here you go!" Sanae said brightly.

"You didn't have to. I could have bought some bread at the kiosk," I said.

"I couldn't let you do that! General Sanae doesn't let her superiors eat poorly!"

We blended quite nicely into the background.

"Just for your information, a General is ranked higher than a Lieutenant," I pointed out.

"Oh. So that makes me the superior? Then I order you to eat! Tuck in!" she declared.

"Hey, this isn't made of leftovers from the shop," I commented as I looked at the bento box Sanae had prepared for me.

"How can I make you eat leftovers when you're helping me out?" she said, puffing her cheeks.

I work part-time at the eatery that Sanae's family runs. By now I had memorized what they had on the menu, and I could also tell that Sanae's lunch was usually made of leftovers from the night before. But the bento box before me didn't have a scrap of leftovers at all. It was cooked that morning.

The lunch Yuki made every day was a work of art. Perfectly prepared and cooked with great care, similar to what you would eat in expensive restaurants.

In comparison, Sanae's lunch was a simple generic bento filled with regular homemade dishes. I found the change appealing.

"I'm surprised you noticed. I never thought you would remember what was on the menu last night."

"Are you sure it's alright if I eat this?" I asked.

"Of course! That's what I've been saying..."

"I meant, wouldn't you want Kouhei to eat your cooking first?"

"So you think I haven't tried?" she said, slumping.

"Not really," I admitted.

"He said 'Thanks Sanae' as usual, and that was it. You can't imagine how disappointed I was."

"You spoil him too much."

I dug into the peppered potato salad. Compared to the potato salad Yumi-san made, which was seasoned to suit the general crowd, Sanae's was a little bit saltier.

Although I was in the habit of eating Yuki's delicately flavored cooking, I found myself working my way through Sanae's lunch box with great gusto.

"Here, have some tea," she said, handing me a cup.

"Thanks."

"We must look strange," she murmured.

"Huh?" I took a mouthful of tea Sanae had passed me.

"We probably look like we're dating."

"Bfffff!!" I choked violently.

"Oh-ho, Masaki-kun! From the way you reacted, it's obvious that you're suddenly super aware of our surroundings now!" she teased.

"No, I'm not..." I coughed and looked up.

"Hey, Isn't that Yuki Towada's husband over there?" a senior whispered.

"Yeah, looks like it. Who's that? His mistress? I suppose that's usual for someone married into a powerful family," another said.

"Wait a minute, that's Sanae Morino! He's got her too?? Oh no, she's one of the popular ones! Her fans are going to be heartbroken. They'll jump off the roof if they find out."

"Nah, before they do that, I'm sure they'll cut Konno up in pieces and scatter his body in the mountains."

"Oh, Konno-kun's hopeless! But I really dig the fact he looks so decent, despite being a player!"

"Please, concentrate on your studies."

"Discussing Konno and Towada's dirty gossip is far more interesting than study!"

The seniors were relentless.

I wanted an aspirin.

I also wanted some disinfectant and bandages too, just in case Yuki heard all of those rumors later.

"Well, what are we going to do?" Sanae asked.

"We're going to gather information." I ignored the whispers around us and put the mission on priority.

"Information? But I already know everything about Kouhei..."

"Just to be safe, it would be good to know if he's in love with or dating someone else already."

"Uh...mmmm."

Sanae looked choked, and then fell silent.

"Better be prepared for the worst situation."

"Masaki-kun, you think nasty."

"But this is what you need me for, isn't it? Somebody's got to think of stuff like that."

"Does all this precaution come from experience?" Sanae leaned forward curiously.

"Did something sad happen to you in the past?"

"..."

"I'm so sorry! P-please stop crying! I didn't think it was that bad!!"

10 minutes later...

"Sniff... so we're going to spy on Kouhei for a while, okay?... Sniff..."

"Please dry your tears! You make me feel so guilty I'd really offer to be your mistress if you keep making a face like that!"

"I'm a man. I'm a man!!" I psyched myself up and took a deep breath. "Alright, Sergeant Sanae. We will begin our spy mission today!"

"Oh, thank god you're back! Yes, sir!"

"We'll start straight after school. Make sure you find an excuse not to walk home with Kouhei today."

"Mmm, okay. But..."

"Yeah?"

"This isn't really a spy mission, but more of an infidelity mission, isn't it?"

"Well... yeah." I felt embarrassed to admit I was enjoying the idea a bit too much.

And so, the Masaki Konno Investigation Team began.

Operation: Sakura Tagami

The 8th of February, a few days into our investigation.

"Ugh, I still can't get used to this, I'm so nervous!" Sanae said.

It was after school, during cleaning time. Sanae and I were tailing Kouhei from a distance.

There were only two classes in each grade. But the school premises were huge, making it a tiring chore. However, it also meant that we had a lot of places in which to hide.

"It would be a problem if you really did get used to sneaking around. But putting that aside..."

"Hmmm?"

"I really think you should stop wearing that ridiculous towel around your head."

"Hey! This is the traditional Nezumi-Kozo style! You're supposed to sneak around like this!"

"That was centuries ago. We're in the modern age now, and we aren't running on rooftops or stealing anything."

"Would you prefer me to wear American mouse ea-"

"Stop right there!"

She was treading on dangerous ground. I took a few minutes to explain to her a few facts about lawsuit and copyright.

"But, if the first one is public domain..."

"It's safer if we just don't!"

We almost lost Kouhei in the process, but soon managed to catch up.

Occasionally we would wipe the windows, pretending to do our job while we kept our distance from him.

"Oh..." Sanae stopped.

"Yeah."

We quickly hid behind a pillar, watching as one of our juniors walked towards Kouhei.

"Kouhei-senpai!" She called out, catching his attention.

"Well, if it isn't Tagami-san's little Sakura-chan."

"Don't call me that! You're making me sound like a baby!"

"Well, why not? It suits you." Kouhei patted her on the head.

"You're treating me like I'm a baby too."

"I'm sorry you don't like it, but to me you're still little Sakura that got stuck in a tree. Mind you, it took some effort to save you then."

"I'm grown up now! Don't treat me that way! Y-you can keep your hand on my head though."

"You're being weird. Hey, your hair feels softer than usual."

"I curled it, just a little. But even my friends didn't notice the change! How did you-..."

"Because I've got fingers as sensitive as a sushi master when it comes to your hair."

"We've heard that joke before! Is he turning senile? Can't he be more original?"

"Uh, Sanae-san?"

"Hmm?"

"You've still got a smile on your face, but it's obvious you're angry since I can see the veins protruding from your forehead. Please stop that you're scaring me."

"He's using the same joke he uses when he talks about my weight on a different woman!"

"It's no big deal even if he's sensitive to how soft Sakura's hair is-"

Before I could finish, she unleashed a ferocious volley of haymakers.

"-Yeah it's a real problem. He shouldn't be saying things like that to every girl he knows, please stop hitting me." I swallowed my pride in an attempt to survive.

"Grrrr!" Sanae continued to growl like a mountain lion.

"Grandpa wants to see you. I thought I should let you know," Sakura continued.

"Grandpa Tagami?"

"Remember what happened at the end of last year? Well, he got pretty tired after that and has been under the weather since. He'd appreciate it if you came over for a chat, just to keep him company."

"He did help out a lot, making phone calls and whatnot. I don't know if I'd be good company, though. I don't really have any good stories to tell."

"Oh, you don't have to tell him stories, he just wants to see if you're good enough for me... Nothing! Forget that I said that!"

"What did you say? You're talking too fast. Anyway, what time do you want me to visit?"

"Huh?"

"He wants me to visit right? Well, what time am I supposed to go? Are we going after school?"

"You mean you'll come?" Sakura looked surprised, as if it were too good to be true.

"What reason do I have to decline the invitation?"

"Um, usually guys would get pretty intimidated."

"Is that so?" Kouhei replied affably, and proceeded to get a broomstick from a cupboard.

"S-senpai?"

"Come on, let's finish this up."

"N-no, you don't have to help me! I can do this myself!"

"That's what all kids say," Kouhei grinned and ruffled her hair.

"Hey! It took time to style my hair this morning, don't mess it up!"

"Oooh, you were styling your hair? Playing grown up now are you?"

"I am grown up! ...I grew up for you."

"Huh?"

"Forget that I said that! Alright, let's just finish cleaning up and go!"

"Sakura, I need a hand from you before we visit Grandpa Tagami,"

"What!? You want my hand?"

"What are you saying? I just wanted you to help me find a gift for him. I can't really go empty handed, can I?"

"Oh, is that it, right, of course," Sakura pouted.

"Why are you mad?" Kouhei asked. "Uh, well, this is hard for me to ask, but..."

"What?"

"Can I borrow some cash?"

".....you're asking me, when you're going to buy a gift for my family?"

"Please? I don't have enough on me at the moment. I'm depending on you!"

"Alright, but you owe me."

"Thanks! My savior! I'll even pay you back with my body if you want! Call me your dog if you wish, I'm at your disposal!"

"Alright, alright, you don't have to be so extreme, it's no big deal, calm down!... but..."

"Hmm?"

"Did you say you'd pay me back with your body?"

"Grrrrrrrr!!!!!"

"Um... General Sanae?"

"What is it, Lieutenant Masaki?"

"Please let go of the towel you're wringing in your hands. You're destroying it."

Sure enough, the towel Sanae was holding had torn in two from her wringing. It was even fraying at the ends. I wondered whether it would take more energy to crush an apple using bare hands, just to take my mind off the fact that the girl I was standing next to was terrifying.

"Why doesn't he understand? If he keeps being nice to all of the girls like that, they will get the wrong idea!"

She was speaking slowly and had all the mannerisms of the pleasant Sanae I was used to, but for some reason I felt shivers running up my spine.

If I could, I would have ran on the spot.

But I persevered.

"Don't worry about it. What you have seen will have no impact on our goal."

"What do you mean?"

"Just as you said, he's nice to all the girls."

"Which means, she's just one of a million. In other words, she's nothing special to him." Sanae nodded.

"They know each other from childhood too!"

"But you know him from young, and you know him well. Your advantage lies in how deep your connection is with him and the trust you've built by staying by his side for all these years. Don't forget that."

"Mmm..."

"You've still got an advantage. From what I've seen, she's the type that likes working from the outside in. She's not going to make the first move. Nothing is going to change for her."

"The first move?"

"Sanae?"

"Oh!" Sanae turned beet red and covered her face with her hands.

"I see you're an expert in image training."

Sanae was muttering to herself now, and from what I could hear she sounded like she was reading a play.

"Kouhei, I've loved you all my life. Kouhei takes Sanae's hands. Sanae, so have I. Ooooh!!!!!"

I sighed. I was prepared for this since I had an idea what I was getting myself into when I agreed to help out.

I wasn't worried about Sakura Tagami at all.

I was pretty sure she wouldn't be a problem. Sanae wouldn't need any help from me.

Before I realized it, cleaning time was over.

Kouhei and Sakura had already left.

Operation: Moyori Uesugi

The 10th of February, a week into our investigation.

Yes, I was sure Sakura wasn't going to be a problem.

"No one except the members of the Student Council are allowed in!"

But the problem, I realized soon after, lay elsewhere.

"If the student council isn't open to students, I think that should be changed! A council of the students, by the students, for the students!"

"Grrrrr!!!" Moyori growled.

"Grrrrr!!!" Sanae echoed, equally feral.

"Hey Masaki," Kouhei muttered, leaning toward me.

"What, Kouhei?" I replied.

"What's up with these two?"

"Don't ask me."

We were just about to end our investigation week when Kouhei was called to the Student Council to help. Naturally we followed him, being nosy about the matter...

"Why are you peeping at us!?"

...and we got found out.

Everybody's favorite enemy, Moyori Uesugi, had her claws out waiting.

She was a small girl, even shorter than Mizuho, but she still managed to intimidate teachers twice her size. She had her hair neatly clipped short and always had her hands on her hips, ready to take anybody on.

"Moyori, calm down. Be nice," Kouhei said gently. "You're making the council look bad."

"If you say so, Kouhei-senpai," she replied, instantly benign.

But Kouhei was an exception.

"Kouhei's not a member of the council either!" Sanae protested.

"Kouhei-senpai is here to help, unlike you Morino-senpai," Moyori snapped. "You're obviously just here to be a peeping to with dirty motives."

"What do you mean dirty motives!? What made you say that?"

"Your eyes!" Moyori shot back.

"Grrrr!!!" Sanae growled again.

"Um... Miss Moyori...?" Mizuho, who was sitting at her desk, raised an arm meekly.

"What is it? Have you gone through the documents I've given you?" Moyori asked sharply.

"Um, about these receipts and the numbers here... can't we calculate them without the decimals?" Mizuho asked timidly.

"What are you saying!?" Moyori exploded. "You're the Head of Council, you shouldn't be making suggestions to do things by halves! It seems to me you don't understand the importance of money. Let me give you a lesson or two. Listen, about money... (continues)"

"Mercy! Mercy! Please forgive me, forgive me for being bad at maths, forgive me for being alive and having grades so low I'm in the bottom of my grade...!!" Mizuho wailed, completely defeated.

"As long as you get my point," Moyori said with a huff. "Why are these trespassers still here? We have important things to deal with. You people, leave, now!"

"B-but..."

"Kouhei-senpai, can you help me with the usual?" Moyori asked, pointing toward the steel cupboards filled with folders.

"If you just tell me what to get, I'll get it for you," Kouhei offered.

"Only I know how the documents are filed, so it's faster if I get them," She insisted. "Please, hurry. I'd prefer to do this while those two are still looking."

"You're getting heavy lately, you know?" Kouhei grumbled as he put his hands around her waist and lifted her above his head.

"Say that I'm gaining curves. It's closer to the truth!" Moyori replied as she rummaged through the folders.

"Well, you're still lighter than Sanae, that's for sure."

"She's just fat. She's the type that accumulates her weight around her stomach. I'm not like her," Moyori sniffed.

And that is when I saw it. Moyori Uesugi, while being carried up high in Kouhei's arms, was looking down at Sanae triumphantly. I could even hear her laugh through her nose.

"Oh, she wants to die."

I could hear Sanae's blood vessels in her temples expand in rage. They made frightening, snapping noises.

"Mizuho, what do you need to get done?" I quickly cut in with a question before things got worse.

Sanae and Moyori visibly swallowed whatever insults they were going to throw at each other.

"You've got lots of work, right? Isn't that why you needed Kouhei's help?" I asked.

"Yeah," Mizuho said. "The annual council meeting is coming up and we need to sort the documents and make booklets."

"So you need people to help make the documents into booklets?"

"Yeah."

"Wait!" Moyori yelled to try and stop me, but it was already too late.

"Well then, Sanae and I could help too," I said.

"You'll help us?" Mizuho asked, nearing tears.

"Sure. Is that alright, Sanae?"

"Um... s-sure!" Sanae replied, puffing up again.

"Then let's get to work."

"Uhgh!" Moyori made a funny noise in her throat. Despite being a firecracker, she wasn't the sort to challenge someone's authority.

If Mizuho, the Head of the Council, allowed us to stay, then she would abide by her decision.

"Hey Moyori, can I put you down now? My arms are starting to hurt," Kouhei asked.

"I'm almost done!" she snapped.

Kouhei tilted his head, unaware why Moyori looked disgruntled.

"Looks like you need someone to photocopy the documents," I said.

"That's supposed to be my job," Kouhei said as he lowered Moyori to the ground. She had an armful of folders now.

"And, I suppose you also need to calculate the remains of your receipts for the final statement of finance," I added.

I looked at Sanae.

"Uuuurgh, I really can't get my head around this!!" Mizuho reacted just the way I wanted her to.

"You're hopeless Mizuho," Kouhei groaned. "Moyori, would you mind helping her out?"

"B-but, who's going to help you Kouhei-senpai?" Moyori asked, flustered.

"C'mon Sanae, let's go."

"Of course!"

And with that, the two of them walked out of the classroom.

Before they left, Sanae spun around and stuck out her tongue at Moyori.

I heard the sound of Moyori's blood vessels popping in her temples.

I stayed in the room, subjected to Moyori's subdued yet boiling rage.

The secretary of the student's council was quietly typing away at her laptop, making the last of the documents needed.

I helped her check for errors while we waited for the two to come back.

Moyori was being extra harsh on Mizuho as she taught her how to do the calculations. She served some tea to all of us at one point, and when she brought me a cup, she whispered in my ear:

"Don't you think I will ever forget this, Towada's bitch."

I was instantly depressed.

"You got the short end of the stick," the school council secretary, Mizukami-san, whispered to me. "You've made Moyori Uesugi your enemy, but you've gained nothing from it."

"I know that," I sighed.

"Why are you smiling then?"

"I know it's not exactly a smart thing to do, but..."

"Did you hedge the risk at some point?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

The door opened.

"Sorry to drag you into this. It must be heavy," Kouhei said as he stepped in.

"No, not at all! I can handle it!" Sanae looked over the moon as she spoke with Kouhei.

"It was the right thing to do for a friend," I said.

"You're an idiot Masaki," Mizukami-san murmured.

"Yuki tells me that often," I replied.

"You really are," Mizukami-san repeated, but she was smiling too.

Just one of us

"Kouhei-senpai, if you ever find that girl trying anything weird on you, let me know immediately!"

Ever the one to declare war, Moyori Uesugi made a parting shot before she left in an expensive looking car.

She was the only child of the Uesugi rice wine breweries, one of the biggest breweries in the area. Her family probably chauffeured her to and from school for security reasons.

"What was she going on about?"

Just for information, one of the Uesugi's most popular wines was named "Samurai spirit".

"It's so cold." Mizuho shuddered as we stood by the school gates.

By the time we had decided it was impossible to finish everything in one day, it was past seven in the evening.

"We could have asked for a lift," she added.

"If we got into that car, it would drive us to Moyori's house, not ours," Kouhei said with a grimace. "I don't know why, but she doesn't let anyone else other than me get in. Looks like she has a problem with people."

"Oh man... I can't believe you're so dense," Mizuho groaned. "I'm almost starting to feel bad for our treasurer."

"Urgh, I can sympathize!"

"Huh? What did I do?" Kouhei demanded. "And why are you guys being so secretive again? Especially you two, Sanae and Masaki. You

have no idea how much Mizuho and I go through to calm Yuki down lately."

"That's not really our fault," I said. "It's mainly yours for being so oblivious."

"I don't understand," he insisted.

"Well, you should," I huffed.

"What?" Kouhei asked, befuddled.

I looked at Sanae and she ducked her head, looking uneasy.

"Hey, are you bullying Sanae?" Kouhei snapped. "I won't forgive you if you treat her badly!"

"You're telling me that?" I shot back.

"You've got NO right to say that," Mizuho added.

"Kouhei, you of all people shouldn't say that!" Sanae said.

"Wh-what!? Why's everyone suddenly against me!?" he cried. "Oh, forget it! I'm just going to go home and play Imouto romance games until I feel better."

"Ugh! That's so disgusting," Mizuho said. "I can't believe you said that in front of your actual sister! By the way, about the game you're referring to, I managed to sell it for a real high price on the web. Looks like it's got premium value now."

"NO!!!!" Kouhei wailed.

I heaved a sigh as I watched Kouhei drop to his knees to mourn his loss.

I wondered why things never ran smoothly.

Everybody, including myself, where did we make our mistakes?

Not saying what we really want to say. Hoping for something that never happens.

I couldn't stand it.

I wanted change.

"Mizuho, do you mind coming to my place for a while?" I asked.

"Huh? Why the sudden invitation?" she asked.

"You wanted to learn my mom's hamburger recipe, right? We're having that tonight."

"Mami-chan's making it? ...Oh." Mizuho's wary expression changed into one of understanding.

She knew what I was up to.

"Huh? How come only Mizuho gets an invitation?" Kouhei demanded.

"Because I get to decide whatever I want to do with my mistress, remember?" I teased.

"I'm not giving you my sister!" he shouted, throwing a punch.

I wasn't as fast as Kouhei, and I got knocked down easily.

"I was just kidding," I ground out after landing spreadeagled in the snow.

"There are some things you can't joke about, even if we're all friends forever," Kouhei grumbled as he pulled me out of the snow.

"We're all friends forever?" I asked.

"Of course," he said.

"Cool."

I looked at Sanae. She looked as if she was about to cry, but it was my job to bring out the truth. To see how he felt.

Friends forever, he said.

A tight bond of trust, where we would look out for one another. A secure and comfortable relationship, knowing we could depend on each other.

But it was also something Sanae had to break down.

"Well, mom did invite Mizuho over," I said. "Why else do you think I came to the Student Council in the first place?"

"Oh, so that's why you wanted to see me." Mizuho nodded as if she was convinced.

"Sorry I didn't ask sooner, but we did get pretty tied up and it slipped my mind. Are you free?" I asked.

"Sure." Mizuho walked over to my side. "Onii-chan, make sure you see Sanae home safely!"

"You really aren't going to try anything funny on my sister?" Kouhei pressed.

"If I did, Yuki would kill me," I said.

"That's good enough insurance, I suppose," he said with a grin as he walked away, Sanae by his side.

Mizuho and I stood at the forked path, ready to head a different direction.

"Let's go," I said.

"You lied, didn't you?" Mizuho asked quietly. "It's pretty late already, so dinner would already be cooked by now. And if you were told to ask me over, it would have never ever 'slipped your mind'. You never forget promises, Masaki-san."

"Yeah," I admitted.

We started walking home.

Then we both looked back at the same time, towards the direction Sanae and Kouhei had gone.

"Of course I had to lie," I said.

Distance

I've always been the one to speak only when I was required to in the group. Or at least, that's how I understood myself.

Someone would say something and I would take time to think about it and make a reply.

But what was I supposed to say when I was alone with Kouhei?

I was so happy that Masaki-kun gave me this opportunity...

"But I'm not prepared," I whispered.

"Prepared for what?" Kouhei parroted, looking into my face.

"Um..." I murmured.

And just like that, I was tongue-tied.

"Are you alright? You've been acting weird lately," he said.

"Everything's fine!" I insisted.

"No it's not," he said. "It's normal for you to stay silent when we're alone, but you've never acted this strange before."

He was worried about me.

"Yeah, maybe I am feeling a bit funny," I admitted. "I have something on my mind."

I felt pained.

"Want to talk about it? You might feel better," he offered.

How I wish I could.

The snow muted our footsteps. I could hear both of us walking together, clashing with the sound of my heartbeat drumming in my ears.

Kouhei was facing forward.

He kept quiet.

It wasn't an uncomfortable silence.

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't.

I knew my feelings.

I couldn't keep them to myself anymore.

But yet, I couldn't express them to him either.

I found myself walking with my eyes downcast.

I could see Kouhei's large hand swinging by his side as he walked.

Hands I couldn't forget.

I held a breath.

I reached out, and...

"It's cold today," he said suddenly.

"Y-yeah, it is," I replied, snatching my hand back.

Embarrassment washed over me. I was such a coward.

"I wonder what's gotten into Masaki lately?" Kouhei asked. "He hasn't eaten lunch with us in ages... neither have you."

"We've got stuff to do," I said.

"Is it so important that you can't have lunch?" he asked. "The seniors have been gossiping about you guys. About you two in the library together."

"It has nothing to do with the library," I said quickly.

"Is it something you can't talk about?" he asked.

I can't talk about it because it's about you.

"It's getting increasingly harder to calm Yuki down, you know," he added.

"W-we'll be done soon, don't worry!" I said.

"Well whatever it is, I hope you finish it before Yuki scars me for life. Literally!"

"It can't be that bad. Only Masaki-kun gets the serious thrashing," I reasoned.

"Yes, it IS pretty bad! All my fans around the world would be heartbroken if my perfect skin gets marred."

"What fans? What perfect skin?" I asked.

"Didn't you know? My skin's as smooth as a baby's butt. I'm beauty commercial material," he said proudly.

"You're delusional!"

"At least I made you laugh."

"Huh?"

My brain stopped functioning for a moment, when he suddenly broke out a smile.

"It suits you better when you laugh," he said gently.

"Huh?... What?" I stammered.

"I hate seeing one of us look sad," he said.

"One of us?" I repeated.

Something in me snapped.

"Sanae?" he asked, startled.

Before I knew it, I had grabbed hold of his arms angrily.

What happened to the shy and awkward person I was seconds ago?

I let go of him.

I walked a few steps before him, and spun around to confront him.

"Until when?" I demanded.

Sanae Morino had always stood next to Kouhei Touyama.

"What's gotten into you?"

But now I was standing before him, face to face.

Kouhei stopped in his tracks. His expression of confusion turned into something wary.

I knew I was being unreasonable, that I had exploded on impulse, but I couldn't stop now.

It's true, I was comfortable being one of the group, being "one of us" for such a long time.

I felt special being included in Kouhei's definition of "one of us", but now I didn't value that the way I used to anymore.

It wasn't enough for me. I wanted to be more, and I was venting my frustration onto him for not thinking otherwise.

He had every right to think the way he did.

I was in the wrong.

I knew that.

I knew that!

"Say something!" I shouted.

But I couldn't control myself. I expressed my anger freely. I could feel my mouth contorting into a scowl.

I didn't feel any remorse for attacking him.

My head was heating up, burning with an angry fire, engulfing all my rational thoughts and melting them away.

"You scared me there for a moment," he said quietly.

"I..."

"I've never seen you angry like that before," Kouhei laughed.

"Why are you laughing!?" I demanded.

"You're always either smiling or looking worried, so it's kinda satisfying to see another side of you," he said with an earnest smile.

It was hard to stay angry at such a gentle face.

I could feel the hot fire in me burn down into a warm, comforting ember.

To Kouhei Touyama, Sanae Morino was "one of us", a dear friend.

"Stop being nice to me, I just vented my anger on you!" I said.

Even though I hated it, I also knew I took solace in our comfortable friendship too.

"Well, you must have had a pretty good reason to do so," Kouhei said as he swatted the snow off my hair. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I sure do!"

"Then..."

"I'll tell you during this week. Just not today," I said.

"Alright," he replied.

Kouhei didn't pursue the matter further. He gave me a nod and began to walk again in silence.

He walked at a slightly faster pace than I did.

I ran a little to catch up, so we could walk side by side.

I wasn't angry anymore. The anger was replaced by something deeper, something more condensed.

My heart felt tight and heavy.

We kept walking side by side, never facing each other.

I looked at the familiar path before us, the path we always walked together on our way home.

Just a few more inches. If I could just walk a little bit faster, so he'd see me.

If I could just get in his view, so he would realize that I was always by his side.

It was so close. If I could just take one extra step forward.

But that place seemed so far away.

Cooking Program

13th of February, the day before Valentine's.



"Tara-rattat-tattat-tan!"

"....."

"Come on Yuki, you too!"

"Must I?"

"Yes! We have to sing the cooking show song!"

"We'll start again from the beginning. Tara-rattat-tattat-tan!"

".....Tara-rat tat-ta ttat-tan!"

"Tara-rat tat-tat tat-tat tat-tat tat-tan! Tan! Tan!"

"It'll take more than three minutes!"

Mizuho, Yuki, and I had occupied the Sanae's kitchen.

Since the shop was closed for the day, the place felt larger than usual, and a little too empty for the three of us.

"You know, to be honest I'm not too keen on this. I've only got Onii-chan and dad to give chocolate to."

"I'm not fond of western sweets."

"Oh come on people! Don't be so negative!"

"Can't we just make some Japanese cakes?"

"I hear Masaki-san's quite fond of chocolate."

"So I have to boil some water to melt the cacao butter, right Sanae!?"

Yuki suddenly turned very enthusiastic.

"We've always bought our chocolates from the department store," Mizuho grumbled as she chopped a chocolate bar into small pieces.

"I've heard from Masaki-san," she whispered conspiratorially.

"What did you say, Mizuho?"

"I was just asking Sanae if she had any good ideas to stop Onii-chan from being a pervert."

"There's nothing you can do," Yuki sighed.

"Aren't you answering a bit too fast? Give us some hope!"

It wasn't a topic Yuki had interest in, so she soon returned her full attention to the recipe book.

"Yuki isn't very good at being discreet," Mizuho grinned. She resembled her brother so much when she did that.

"But I didn't think you'd fall for someone as dim-witted as Onii-chan."

"I'm sorry. It must be so weird for you."

"Don't apologize! I'm actually glad he's actually got someone that doesn't mind having him." Mizuho looked a little bit sad when she said that.

Once the chocolate was chopped into bits, it looked like a substantial amount.

After getting a kitchen timer ready, some water was boiled so the chocolate could be melted. The plan was to split the chocolate into three small pots so everyone could melt their own.

"I thought you'd never come forward about it," Mizuho said softly, without taking her eyes off of her pot. "I thought we would all stay this way forever, having fun just the way we are. I never imagined you would think to change that."

The chocolate began to soften at the edges.

"But, why now?"

"He held my hand."

A thick, sweet aroma filled the room.

"That's so simple."

"It is. Because it was so simple, I couldn't make any excuses. I couldn't deny it."

"Deny what?"

"My feelings."

"I didn't think Masaki-san would cooperate."

"If I didn't have Masaki-kun's help, I don't think I could have made this step."

The chocolate melted into a creamy liquid.

"He doesn't look like the sort that would care. I thought he was... cold."

"He is cold, but I think he's helping me because he wants to maintain his environment."

"Environment?"

"Having you, me, Yuki, Kouhei, and Shiro-sama as his friends. Keeping this balance."

"But he's helping you out even when he knows he has to suffer Yuki's wrath."

"Yeah. He's so unpredictable."

"I would have understood if there were something in it for him, but... Oh well, I guess we should be happy just to know that he's on our side."

"Yeah."

"I'll help too, of course!" Mizuho said proudly.

"Hey," Yuki cut in.

"Thanks, Mizuho-chan."

"Hey, both of you!" Yuki barked.

"Hmm?"

"The mix."

"What?"

Yuki pointed a finger.

Sanae and Mizuho both looked at the direction.

"Oh no!!"

"No!!"

"That's what happens when you don't pay attention," Yuki scolded.

The two pots before them were smoking, and the chocolate had burnt at the bottom.

They had to rectify the problem by having Yuki share her successful batch.

"Sanae, do you happen to have a Naginata shaped mold?"

"Naginata shaped? Are you sure it's a good idea to put THAT part of your personality in here?"

"Hmm? Mizuho, don't you think it's important to give some character to your cooking?"

"Not that kind of originality, no."

"Well, at least we managed to accomplish the job!"

"Yes. Now we only have to give it to the people we intend to give it to. But..." Yuki trailed off wistfully.

"But?"

"Nowadays, Masaki hasn't been very responsive," Yuki lamented. "He doesn't even eat the lunch I make him anymore. Yet yesterday, he came to beg for some 'Towada Kanmi' vouchers."

"Towada Kanmi? Isn't that the expensive dessert shop?"

"Yes. He's just doing whatever he pleases! Taking, but not giving. We are dangerously close to getting a divorce."

"Already!?... Wait a minute, you guys aren't even married yet."

"He only needs to sign here."

"You actually carry marriage papers with you!?" Mizuho asked, bewildered. "Well, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. That's typical of you."

"Somehow I have a feeling that wasn't a compliment."

"Oh, never mind. Let's wrap things up with a Shime."

"A Shime?"

"Yeah. Why not? We did a pretty good job!"

"Uh, okay?"

Mizuho stuck out her fist, gesturing to the other two to do the same.

"To cooking with dishonorable intentions!" Yuki declared.

"Don't you mean cooking with love?"

"That too."

Valentine's Day was tomorrow.

Mission start

14th of February, Valentine's Day.

15:00

The sweet aroma of chocolate wafted through the air.

This was the day I was waiting for.

No, I wasn't just waiting for it, I was anticipating it.

The final bell rang, marking the end of school.

"Masaki! Today-" Yuki burst through the door, calling out to me.

"Later!" I shot back, slipping past her and scooting away.

The corridor was freezing cold, but I had better things to think about than the temperature.

I ran today's schedule through my head.

About now, Kouhei would be trying to calm Yuki down.

After that, Sanae would ask an exhausted Kouhei to meet her at the back gates of the school.

I was worried perhaps Sanae wouldn't be able to gather the courage to ask him out, but it was something she had to do.

This was something she wanted. She had to be the one to make the first move.

I looked at the clock.

Judging from the personalities of the two juniors, they would head directly for the back gate as soon as possible.

The distance from their classrooms was closer than mine, so I had to hurry.

I ran.

Faster, faster, faster.

Change could happen in a split second.

Speed was important in all matters, or so I believed.

Speed.

"Sanae and speed?" I murmured, stopping for a moment to consider the idea.

Then I began to run again.

I was somebody that valued speed when changes were to be made.

But what about Sanae?

"That doesn't suit her," I muttered as I quickened my pace.

15:15

Behind the school

"Um..." Sakura Tagami's voice wavered in the cold air.

"Why did you come? I have something important to do here," Moyori Uesugi said sharply.

"I have something important to do here too," Sakura replied, trying to sound firm.

"Sakura Tagami, from Class 2," Moyori recited, her tone dripping with disdain. "Member of the Cooking Club, known for being popular like everyone's favorite puppy. I hear you're rumored to be the next club manager. How exciting. I can't wait for the financial meetings to decide on the club budget."

"U-Uesugi-san, please don't bully me like that," Sakura pleaded.

"How do you know my name?" Moyori demanded.

"You're famous," Sakura said simply.

Moyori Uesugi, notorious for her obsession with money, frowned at the piece of news.

"If you're trying to play the cutesy princess to gain adoration the way you always do, that won't work on me," she warned.

"Uesugi-san, why are you so hostile all the time?" Sakura asked, tilting her head.

"Until the Uesugi's overpower the Towada's, everybody is a potential enemy," Moyori declared.

"Oh, I see! You're playing the meanie with a kind heart," Sakura said brightly.

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Moyori snapped.

"Just saying, but that's kind of a pity though," Sakura said cautiously.

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say," Moyori muttered.

"I mean, you're really pretty," Sakura explained. "But if you're angry all the time, even the people you like would be afraid of you."

"Wha..." Moyori sputtered.

"Shy from the compliment?" Sakura teased.

"No, I'm not!" Moyori barked back.

"Really?" Sakura asked, smiling.

"I see you're definitely an enemy of mine," Moyori growled.

"Oh, come on. Let's be friends!" Sakura said cheerfully.

"No way!" Moyori shot back.

I was watching them both from a distance, studying their relationship.

But it was time I made my presence known, I couldn't afford to keep them waiting too long.

I took a deep breath, and walked towards them.

"Towada's bitch!" Moyori spat the moment she noticed me.

"I just told you, it's a pity if you're mean like that," Sakura sighed.
"Hello Masaki-senpai."

"You're both on time," I smiled at my juniors, the cute one and the surly one.

"Um, where's Touyama-senpai?" Sakura asked timidly.

"What!? What do you have to do with Kouhei-senpai?" Moyori growled.

"You too, Uesugi-san?" Sakura said, startled.

They both stared at each other in disbelief, and then turned to me.

"What is this about? Explain, Towada's dog!" Moyori demanded.

Dog, huh? She made it clear that she thought I was below her.

"Kouhei's a bit busy now, and asked me to bring you a message. He wants to meet you somewhere else." I spoke only to Sakura, ignoring Moyori.

"How dare you ignore me, Moyori Uesugi!" she shouted. "So you think you've gained Towada's power, have you? As an Uesugi, I will-"

"You sure put a lot of importance on the Uesugi name." I looked straight into her eyes, confronting her.

"What...?"

She tried to say something back, but only managed to open and close her mouth like a fish.

She was so proud of her heritage, the power her family held, that she had forgotten she herself had not accomplished anything to add to the family's name.

She had an ugly mind. So I told her.

"You know, the real value of a human being lies in how they behave as an individual." I told her.

"Your heritage, the relations you have, what your name is... those things don't matter at all. In terms of the internet, I would say those are just the physical lines. The cables you are provided with. The importance lies in what kind of contract you decide to sign up on. How much you can download, upload, how you communicate. What kind of network you build and how you decide to interact with society and use your influence. You put too much importance in the quality of cables you have without any substance or information to use them properly."

It felt so cathartic to finally rip into her ego.

"But, I don't give a shit about how expensive your cables are!" I continued. "I don't give a damn about your name. Maybe I might get destroyed by whatever authority your family has, for offending you. But it wouldn't be your family's name that does it. It would be somebody else, an actual person that may be in the same family as you that does it, and I would be destroyed by him, a person, not a name. Do you get what I'm saying?"

I could see the haughtiness in Moyori's eyes drain away, replaced by fear.

"So, addressing not Uesugi, but just a simple Moyori, what do you have to say to me?" I asked quietly.

"I... uh... uh..." she stammered.

Never in her life did she think somebody would attack her as an individual.

She had no immunity to the situation.

She froze, her brain being unable to process what had just happened.

I saw her blank expression, and was satisfied.

I could have dug in further in an attempt to find out what kind of person she really was, but that would have to wait for another day.

I was running out of time. I put a smile on my face to show that the confrontation was over.

"Anyway, Kouhei wanted to apologize for making you wait," I said. "He asked me to give these to you."

I waved the vouchers to Towada Kanmi before them.

"Are... are those all-you-can-eat vouchers to Towada Kanmi!?"

Sakura jumped on them immediately.

"But... Kouhei-senpai wouldn't be the sort to..." Moyori muttered distractedly.

I quickly made an explanation.

"I suggested it." I said, pulling my phone from my pocket.

It was on silent mode, and I pushed the playback button to present them a video clip I had recorded previously.

"That's..." Sakura whispered.

They both stared into the screen, which showed Kouhei on his knees begging for something before Yuki.

I pressed the stop button.

"As you can see, he went through a lot of trouble for these," I said.

"Do you mind going with the plan?" I asked. "It would mean a lot for me too, since I'm the one that pressed him to do it."

"All you can eat? YES!" Sakura exclaimed enthusiastically.

"If Kouhei-senpai went through all that trouble... and you too Masaki-senpai... I guess I can't refuse..." Moyori said softly.

"Great! Let's go then."

I ushered them out the back gates.

Moyori Uesugi still looked a bit numb.

If she had been her usual self, I was certain she wouldn't have taken the bait.

Being a sharp girl, she would have been suspicious of the video for all the right reasons.

Of course, I had renamed the file to show today's date, but I couldn't edit the sound that was recorded with it.

If I switched the phone's silent mode off, they would have heard a conversation about last year's exams going on in the background.

I couldn't afford the girls being suspicious of the "proof" I had brought to convince them.

So I needed Moyori to be besides herself, at least for a little while.

"Um..." Sakura murmured.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Sakura looked a bit shy to ask.

"When will Kouhei-senpai arrive?"

"He said he'd message me once he's free," I replied.

"Oh, okay."

"Hey, do you have any recommendations on what to eat there?" I asked.

"Masaki-senpai, you're going to have dessert too?" Sakura asked, surprised.

"I've got a sweet tooth," I said.

"Haha!" Sakura giggled. "You don't look like the sort that likes sugar!"

"I get that all the time. So, any recommendations?"

"Well, from what I read in a magazine..."

I listened to Sakura talk about some reviews she read.

Moyori walked with her head down, but she seemed interested, and quietly listened too.

It appeared that she was gradually recovering.

Both of them looked hopeful.

Kouhei had asked them out.

On Valentine's day, he had asked them out.

They knew how dense he could be, and believed this was one step forward to a closer relationship.

He even made an effort to invite them to Towada Kanmi for the evening after all.

Of course, it was all a lie.

I was lying the whole time.

Sustaining

15:20

Incoming mail for Sanae Morino.

"Sakura Tagami and Moyori Uesugi are out of the way."

It was a message from Masaki-kun.

"Where is he? Doesn't he know what day it is today!?" Yuki Towada shouted as she stormed out of the classroom, her naginata swinging sharply at her side.

"Ugh... I can't do this anymore!" Kouhei muttered as he slumped into his chair.

It was exhausting to calm Yuki down.

Everything was going as planned the way Masaki-kun had said.

Masaki-kun had done his part, and now it was my turn.

"Kouhei," I called quietly.

"What's up?" he asked, looking over.

"I-I have something to tell you," I said, my voice trembling.

"Okay. What is it?" he asked, patient as always.

"I can't tell you here. Can you wait for me at the back gates?" I asked.

"Sure." He didn't ask any questions, he just picked up his bag and made his way.

I stuck my hand into my bag. I felt the smooth surface of the wrapping paper that covered my Valentine gift.

This would change everything.

The relationship we had now...

The relationship we had now?

What was wrong with it?

The fear began to ebb away.

Suddenly, keeping the comfortable relationship I had with Kouhei didn't seem like a bad idea.

It was a feeling I had crushed down many, many times.

I wanted to change things because I couldn't stand it anymore.

Because I couldn't forget the memory of his hands.

But Kouhei and I...

"Morino?"

"Ack!" I yelped. It was our math teacher. I hadn't realized he had walked up to me.

"Oh! I didn't mean to startle you," He apologized. It seems he startled himself startling me. "Do you mind helping me with some chores?"

"Do you need help stapling papers again?"

Sometimes, I would help my math teacher after school.

I wasn't good at math, but I liked to listen to his stories in class.

"Are you busy? There's no rush, it could be done another day," he asked.

I was about to tell him I was occupied...

"No, no problem, I can help!"

...but before I knew it, I had given an answer.

"Great! Follow me." The math teacher walked towards the door, and I stood from my chair to follow.

"Why did I say that?" I whispered to myself.

I felt like I was drowning.

Kouhei was waiting for me outside.

Because he was waiting for me...

"I..."

...I had run away.

I had made an excuse not to move forward with the plan.

I was trying to pretend that this wasn't the day.

"Morino?" The math teacher called.

"I'm coming!"

I grabbed my bag and ran towards him.

"Is there a lot to do?" I asked.

"I think it'll take about two or three hours," he said thoughtfully.

It would mean I would keep Kouhei waiting.

But it also meant we would still remain friends during that time.

I felt thankful that I still had a reason to stretch things out, but...

"I... I'm such a coward."

Second belly

17:00

"Not bad for a place run by Towada!" Moyori scoffed. "Where's the Okami!? I want a word with her!"

"Mmm- this is so good," I commented flatly as I ate a pastry filled with red bean paste.

"Our rice wine didn't take the grand prize this year, but I'm sure Towada bribed the judges! Those dirty scumbags!" Moyori ranted, her voice rising with every word.

"Yeah, yeah! Dirty scumbags!" Sakura chanted.

Moyori Uesugi was openly expressing her distaste for the Towada family, despite being in a shop named after them.

Her cursing turned into a heated rant the more she filled herself up with sugar as the time passed, and now Sakura was being a "good" friend by cheering her on.

Of course, that did not stop either of them from eating through the menu from front to back.

I was sick of everything sweet by now.

"You have balls for shaming Uesugi's name... no, for shaming ME, I'll give you that!" Moyori said as she glared at me through slit eyes.

"Well, that was... uh..." I sputtered.

She was scaring me.

"How dare you!" she growled. "I would imagine an individual could still demand respect regardless!"

"I agree wholeheartedly," I replied quickly.

"Oooh, but maybe you secretly like guys that talk to you that way, Moyori!" Sakura teased, wiggling her eyebrows.

"In what way?" Moyori asked sharply.

"In a rough and tough, cold 'I'm not afraid of you' way, of course!" Sakura burst out laughing at her own inane accusation. She was pretty high on sugar too.

I felt a headache coming on.

"Ignore the idiot on the side," Moyori said, waving Sakura off. "I do have something to say to you though."

"And that is?" I asked cautiously.

One thing I've learned in my relatively short life, was to never talk back to women when they are in a bad mood. Rule of thumb.

"Well..." Moyori murmured as she shuffled to my side. "I DO appreciate guys that can make a good point." She leaned against my shoulder and looked up at me with a blush on her face.

"W-W-WHAAAAT!?" I yelped.

"That's the first time anybody has ever been so direct with me," she said with a shy smile. "You've made quite an impression."

"You're being delusional!" I blurted. "If you stay alive, I'm sure that there are other people that'll give you worse! Please, distance yourself!"

Her uniform was in an untidy state, and I could look down her gaping collar.

I darted my eyes left and right when I noticed that I could almost see her underwear.

"Moyori, Masaki-senpai is looking down your bra!!" Sakura exclaimed, definitely loud enough for the Okami to hear "I wanna join!"

She jumped over the table to join us.



Now I was stuck in the middle of the two of them with no way to escape.

"Here's a little reward for feeding us so well!" Sakura said as she tugged her collar down to give me a peek.

How scandalizing. While her name may sound innocent, but her tastes ran pretty dark.

"Let me see too!" Moyori said, leaning in. "...What! I can't believe you were wearing something so provocative Sakura! Grrr, somehow I feel inadequate now!"

"I don't wear this stuff everyday!" Sakura protested. "I'm only wearing it today because it's a special occasion. Wait a minute, why was it a special occasion again...?"

Oh no! I couldn't let them remember that it was Valentine's day!

"Uh, well, after eating that much, wearing underwear like that isn't going to help much, is it?" I quickly changed the topic to something controversial.

"What!?" Sakura shrieked. "I can't believe you implied something about having a big belly to a girl!!"

"You bitch!" Moyori snapped. "I'll have you know that the word 'fat' is unacceptable in modern society!"

Aaaaand it's back to being treated like a dog.

"Hmph. But it proves that you don't know much about girls, Konno-senpai," Sakura said smugly. "You don't know about the secret anatomy all girls have!"

"Secret anatomy?" I asked, tilting my head.

"It's called the Betsubara. See?" Sakura said as she lifted her shirt, exposing her bare torso.

This was a male teenager's dream.

But I wasn't an average male teenager. I was a sensitive kid, so:

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!!!!" I screamed like a girl.

"And yet you didn't avert your eyes!" Moyori said. I couldn't deny that.

Sakura had a pretty svelte figure, and it was hard not to be impressed.

"Argh! Stop it!! What are you trying to do to me!?" I cried.

"If you think Sakura has a nice figure, think again. See?" Moyori said as she lifted her own shirt.

I screamed like a girl again.

I couldn't believe it. Moyori was a small girl, and all this time she gave the impression that she looked like a preschooler. But underneath that shirt, she was developed in a way I could only describe as micro-voluptuous.

I was pretty sure the girls that saw her in the changing room went green with envy.

"Whoa whoa whoa!! I said stop it!" I pleaded.

"Konno-senpai," Sakura said sweetly, "now that you know about betsubara, you can give us your honest opinion."

".....We aren't fat, are we?" Moyori whispered.

I could feel their heavy breathing on my neck.

Their breath was hot, and smelled sweet from all of the sugar.

It was starting to make me feel giddy.

I held my breath and ignored them, drinking as much tea as I could.

I was going to tough it out, behave, and let the storm pass.

Eventually, their sugar-fueled frenzy burned itself out, and the room finally fell quiet.

"Mmm... stop licking me you dog... I don't mind though... Hmm..." Moyori mumbled in her sleep.

"What dog is that? Mmm.... *Snoooooore*" Sakura added, snoring loudly.

"I stand victorious." I muttered under my breath.

After partying unabashedly and refilling their stomachs again for the umpteenth time, the two had gotten tired and fell asleep.

I had left the battlefield unscathed.

Leaving the room, I asked the Okami to bring blankets for them, and also requested a cab to be called to take them home later.

"You're from Tagami high school, right?" the Okami asked. She was new, young, and spoke casually.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

I was exhausted from listening to Sakura and Moyori prattle on about everything for what felt like hours.

"No problem at all," she said. "I just thought you'd have to be tough to marry into Towada."

"I'm not Yuki's husband," I said quickly.

"The fact that you can call Young Miss by her first name alone proves your courage," she said with a grin.

"You give me too much credit, Ma'am," I replied.

I walked out the front door, unwilling to drag on a conversation any further.

The cold air was refreshing. It helped clear my mind.

I took out my cellphone to check the time.

I had a message.

Whatever fatigue I felt was instantly blown away.

I dialed the number. Sanae picked up immediately.

"Where are you?" I asked.

A method for courage

18:00

My hands were shaking.

Gather the papers together and staple them.

That was all I had to do.

But I couldn't hold the documents properly. They bent, creased, and scattered everywhere.

"AAAAHHHGG!!!"

I finally broke.

Something smashed on the ground. I realized I had thrown the stapler with all my might.

Outside, it was snowing heavily. I could hear the wind whistling through the gaps in the window pane.

The stove at the back of the room was fizzling.

"Shut up!" I barked at... I don't even know what.

I couldn't breathe properly. My chest felt full. I was hot with frustration.

I hated everything.

I hated the noise.

I hated the teacher for having me do his job.

I hated today for being Valentine's.

And above all, I hated myself.

The paper I had in my hand had patches of wrinkles on them. The papers had absorbed my tears, causing the pulp to expand and dry that way.

I was crying.

The stove kept burning.

I felt the streams on my cheeks dry, tightening my skin.

"Oh no..." I gasped as I saw my reflection in the window.

I looked angry, flushed, in a mess.

It wasn't a look that would impress even the most desperate boy.

If I kept staying here, stapling documents, everything would be alright.

Everything would stay the way it was...

Who was I kidding?

I had broken my promise to Kouhei.

It wasn't going to stay the way it was, things had gotten worse since I betrayed his trust.

Even so, the current situation felt better and safer than doing anything else.

I hated the sense of security I had.

I thought about what I would do tomorrow.

I'd make excuses to the teacher so he'd understand why I couldn't finish the job properly.

What was I going to say? That I used his job as an excuse to run away from other issues?

Kouhei would forgive me.

He would, even if I didn't deserve it.

And once he did that, things would be the same again.

Everything would go back to normal, and we'd have our comfortable camaraderie again.

We'd all be happy friends again.

Everything would be fine.

Everything would be fine?

Suddenly, the door flew open.

"Why are you still here?" Masaki Konno asked.

For a moment, I thought a snowman had walked in.

He was covered in snow from head to toe, and he didn't bother shaking any of it off before stepping inside. His expression was unreadable.

"I did my part of the job," he said flatly.

"Yeah, I knew you would," I replied with a hollow laugh.

"And what about you, Sanae?" he asked, his tone sharp.

"Isn't it obvious?" I laughed again, too loudly.

Why was I laughing?

I hated myself for behaving like it was a big joke.

Masaki's expression stayed blank.

"I couldn't do it," I said, forcing a smile. "It wasn't as easy as I thought, see what a coward I am?"

I kept laughing, I couldn't stop.

It wasn't a big deal.

Tomorrow I'd apologize, and everything would be alright.

Back to normal.

Normal.

Friends, as normal.

"Oh come on, say something!" I said hysterically. "I feel like I'm talking to myself!"

"Shut up." Masaki said firmly.

"Eh?"

Before I could react, the papers scattered across the floor. He had swiped the entire pile off my desk.

Still, his expression didn't change.

"M-Masaki, kun..." I whispered, fear creeping in.

He took my school bag away and opened it, going through my things without my permission.

He pulled out the wrapped chocolate, then he pressed it into my hands.

I numbly took it, unable to think anymore.

"Stand up." Masaki said with a commanding voice.

He wasn't going to take no for an answer. He grabbed my arm and forcefully pulled me up to my feet.

"You're hurting me!... Please...!" I cried.

What was I pleading for?

"Shut up," he repeated.

He began pulling me towards the door.

Towards the cold, cold outdoors. Away from my warm, safe haven.

"Let me go!!" I yelled, terrified.

"...Alright," he said.

"Huh...?"

And just like that, he let go of me.

I stumbled forward, and steadied myself by the door.

I turned, pressing my back on the cold wall behind me.

I was trapped.

"Why are you still here?" he asked gently.

"The teacher wanted me to help him with some documents," I replied automatically, coaxed by his change in tone.

"So you decided to give up on Kouhei," he said.

My heart froze.

"No!" I protested.

"You said you wanted to change things," he reminded me.

"I was scared!" I shouted.

"So you gave up on him," he asserted.

"No!"

"Yes, you did," he snapped back. "And you betrayed my trust by wasting all of my efforts too."

"I'm sorry!! I'll do anything you say!!" I cried, my voice cracking.

Why was I so angry when I was in the wrong?

I was turning worse and worse.

But I couldn't stop myself.

"Think of this as an experiment," Masaki said.

"What are you saying?" I asked, trembling.

"Just some advice a goddess gave me. So, let's do an experiment."

"What...?"

"You told me you'd do anything. How about being my girlfriend instead?" he asked coldly.

A loud bang echoed as Masaki slammed his palms against the door above my shoulders.

I flinched at the sound.

He towered over me. He suddenly looked so big.

I wanted to scream for help, but I had lost my voice.

"You've said you'd be my mistress before," he said. "I'll just take up that offer as an apology."

"Yuki won't forgive it!" I growled.

"Maybe I'm just curious to see how she would react?" Masaki-kun said, his voice cold as ice.

His lips twisted into a nasty smile.

"Yuki and Shiro are different. They're powerful. What happens if a normal girl like you gets added into the equation? How would Yuki react? How would Shiro react? I can't wait to find out."

"Jerk!" I shouted.

I didn't feel guilty about betraying him anymore.

"Are you talking about yourself?" he asked calmly.

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Come on, you're being too easy," he said. "If you can't handle a simple jab like that, you sure as hell wouldn't be able to handle Yuki."

"What about Yuki?" I asked.

"Let's say I make you mine. Yuki finds out. She gets angry at me, and... is that it? Do you think you'd be excused?" he asked. "She will be livid. And I'm sure she will have no reservations expressing her

fury on a friend that has betrayed her trust. Nothing will ever be the same again."

"You're horrible. You're horrible-"

"Like I said, you're talking about yourself," he replied. "Besides, I don't even care what you think of me now."

I felt all of my energy drain away.

What was this monster before me?

"For starters..." He said as his hands moved away.

For a moment, I thought he was letting me go.

"Maybe I'll just eat this," he said as he snatched the Valentine's gift from my arms.

"I'm sick of eating red bean paste by now, but I wouldn't mind some chocolate."

His fingers reached towards the tied ribbon.

If he gave it a tug... if he tore away the wrapping...

It wasn't meant for him.

It wasn't meant for him!

"NO!" I yelled as I lunged for it.

"You're too slow," He taunted as my hands sliced through the air.

He had stepped back, holding the Valentine's gift over his head.

"That was a warning. Here."

He then placed the gift into my outstretched hands.

Why did he give it back to me?

"The next time you decide to give up, I may not give it back," he said, giving me a genuine smile.

"Uh... huh?" I mumbled.

He didn't say anything else.

He was waiting.

Was I going to make my move?

Was I going to give up?

What should I do.

What should I do?

What was I thinking?

I had already made my decision by fighting to take back the chocolate from him.

It was so obvious.

I had regained my courage again.

"I'll go now!" I declared.

I turned around and clutched the handle of the door.

The cold metal sent a shock through my fingers.

It was a reminder that there was a cold world waiting for me outside.

I was still scared.

But my body could move.

If I could move, I could do this!

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Masaki asked behind me.

It was a warm invitation. As if to say "you don't have to do this if you don't want to".

But I wasn't going to fall for that anymore.

"I'm going to be Kouhei's girl!" I declared.

I spun around and stuck out my tongue at him.

I opened the door.

I took a step forward.

"You have my full support on that," he called after me.

I wasn't afraid anymore.

"But what you're trying to do now isn't quite your style," he added.

I realized he was encouraging me, pushing me forward in his weird way.

It made me happy.

"Think about the speed. Your pace. Take your time, Sanae."

I nodded and ran.

Sanae's way

I ran down the stairs.

I couldn't believe how light I felt.

I ran to the back of the school, just in case.

Just in case.

I would run through the back gates, straight to Kouhei's house, and-

"You're late."

"Kouhei!" I gasped in disbelief.

I didn't have to run anymore.

He was standing there, covered in snow.

"I thought I was gonna freeze to death here!"

"W-why!?" I blurted.

I ran up to him and dusted the snow off his shoulders and hair.

My hands burned from the cold, but I couldn't care about that now.

"Whaddaya mean?" he asked, confused.

"I'm three hours late! Why would you keep waiting for me!?"

He was shaking like a leaf.

"Eh? You're the one that told me to wait here!"

"Just because of that..." I muttered.

"You said you'd come, so I waited," he said with a smile.

He had no idea how much those simple words meant to me.

"Ugh!" He shuddered and tipped forward.

"Kouhei!" I quickly grabbed him to stop him from falling.

He was as cold as ice.

"Whoa, Sanae you're so warm!" Kouhei exclaimed happily. "Man, you're so warm! You feel so good!"

I felt his arms wrap around my waist. He was trying to warm himself by hugging me like a teddy bear.

"You're warm too!"

"Liar. I'm partially freeze-dried by now," he said with a weak laugh.

"I'm not lying," I said softly.

Kouhei remained Kouhei. I felt so relieved, all of the anxiety and nervousness I had just melted away.

Melted away? I remembered something.

The chocolate.

"Oh!" I pushed him away from me.

"Hey, don't do that!" he protested. "I'm still frickin' cold, I'm gonna die!"



"This!" I said as I handed him the wrapped gift.

"What's this?"

"Don't you know what day it is today?"

"...Oh," he murmured as realization hit.

Even Kouhei knew about Valentine's.

"I only made one this year," I said quietly.

"Huh?"

"I only made your chocolate this year. For you."

"Really? Thanks!" He said plainly. It was the same response I got from him last year when I handed out chocolates to everybody in class.

"Yeah."

Silence.

"That's it."

He was flipping the present over and turning it sideways, studying it with curiosity etched on his face.

"W-w-well, I have to get back now. I've got to help mom in the kitchen."

I turned around and ran.

"Sanae!" he called.

I stopped and looked back, hopeful.

"I thought you were going to tell me what was bothering you lately. What is it?"

His response wasn't what I was hoping for, but then I remembered Masaki-kun's words....

"Take your time, Sanae."

I could say something now.

I could just say it and change everything in this instant.

But that wasn't my style.

"Sanae?"

"The clue is in your hands!" I pointed at the chocolate he was holding.

"See you tomorrow!"

This time I kept running, and I didn't stop.

"What was that all about?" he muttered behind me.

Kouhei remained Kouhei.

Running

Sanae Morino ran without stopping, but she didn't run out of breath.

She didn't know where she got the energy from, but she managed to keep going.

She ran.

She laughed.

Take your time, Sanae.

I should hurry, I should do it now!

She had tried to make a change overnight. To make things happen immediately, as soon as she had made her decision.

But that wasn't who she was.

Kouhei wouldn't change.

Sanae wouldn't change.

It was the reason why he could let down his defenses and hug her so easily.

He teased her thoroughly, and hugged her with no reservations, because he knew he would be forgiven.

It wasn't something he could do just because they were friends.

Kouhei's idea of a "friend" was a lot deeper than what she thought it would be.

She believed so.

No, she knew so.

It was something that they had, something that they accumulated over years and years of being together.

She had changed that day.

She had changed infinitely in order to make a change in the future.

That's why she knew she did alright.

Valentine's didn't move things as fast as she wanted. It was only a small step.

But it was alright.

"I LOVE HIM!!!!!"

Her shout of joy was quickly absorbed into the snow, but it forever rang clear within the walls of her heart.

Epilogue

Touyama Kouhei stood immobile in the snow, holding the Valentine's day gift in his hand.

"That was progress," I muttered.

I, at least thought, Sanae had changed.

I felt someone tapping on my shoulder.

"Give me a second Yuki, I'm thinking now," I said, waving a hand vaguely behind me.

From the exterior, things would probably look the same as before. But internally, I had a feeling Sanae would gradually change the way Kouhei thought about her.

I believed Sanae Morino was capable of making those subtle changes in her own timing.

Tap, tap, tap...

"Wait a second..." I said impatiently.

"No."

I turned to face Yuki Towada, looking terrifyingly similar to the Snow Demoness she had turned into a couple of months ago.

"Uh, Yuki-sama...?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"You have ignored me long enough," she said flatly.

"Well, there was a reason..." I began.

"I know," she cut in.

Mizuho popped her head out from behind Yuki.

"I heard everything," she said brightly. "You were helping Sanae confess her love, well done. I wouldn't expect anything less from my husband."

"Then, you understand..." I almost heaved a sigh of relief.

"But then I see THIS!" She flipped her cellphone out, and I looked at the screen.

"The Okami of Towada Kanmi sent it to me," she added.

It was a video of Sakura and Moyori sleeping with their bellies out.

"Mmmmm, if you touch me there like that..." Moyori murmured in her sleep.

"Masaki-san, that's ticklish, hee hee hee hee hee!!" Sakura giggled.

I observed in a mixture of awe and horror that the cellphone was one of the newer models that displayed video in ultra-high resolution.

Stop. Replay.

I felt the blood drain away from my face.

"Um, there is a reason for this!" I said quickly.

"Catch," Yuki said, tossing me a wrapped gift.

"Is it chocolate?" I asked as I grabbed it.

"It's for you," she replied softly.

"Thanks... but please stop unwrapping Kubikirimaru!!" I yelped as she began to draw her blade.

"You..." she growled.

"Y-Yuki-sama! Have mercy!!" I pleaded.

"Dirty cheater!!" she shouted.

Yuki's full swing sent me flying higher than a home run.

I hit the snow face down like a javelin.

"Oh, hi Masaki," Kouhei pulled me out. I gasped for air as soon as I landed on my bottom. "Trouble with the wife?"

"She's not my wife," I protested.

"So, what did you do this time?" he asked casually.

"You don't even know if I've been wrongly accused!"

"Somehow I find that highly doubtful," He chuckled "So, what did you do this time?"

"The clue is in your hands," I said as I pointed to the chocolate he was holding.

"That again? Sanae said the exact same thing."

"What about Sanae?" I asked, pretending not to know.

"Nothing. Hey, you'll catch a cold if you sit in the snow like that."

I ignored Kouhei and proceeded to unwrap the chocolate that Yuki gave me.

"You're going to eat it here?" Kouhei asked.

"Mom will make a fuss if I bring it home."

"I see," he replied, chuckling at my misery before sitting beside me.

"You'll catch a cold if you sit in the snow like that," I said with a smirk.

"Mizuho will make a fuss if I bring this home."

"I see."

We sat silently in the snow, carefully unwrapping our chocolates.



"Masaki, that's..."

"Heh, very typical of Yuki," I chuckled.

My chocolate was shaped in the form of a Naginata.

"What about yours, Kouhei?"

"Uh....."

He seemed baffled.

"What is it?"

"This." He held up the chocolate in his hands.

It wasn't perfect, but it was shaped as a humongous heart.

"This is the clue?" He asked.

"Hey, it's hand-made," I commented casually.

"This means... huh? What..." he stammered, looking at me with wide eyes.

"Let's eat!" I said, dodging the question.

Kouhei nodded.

I raised Yuki's chocolate to my mouth.

I hope we can stay together in the future.

Kouhei raised Sanae's chocolate to his mouth.

I hope we will be together in the future.

Crack! Crack! The chocolate snapped under our teeth as we both took a mouthful.

They were brittle because of the cold.

But as we took time warming the chunks in our mouths, the chocolate gradually began to melt.

"That's sweet," We mumbled in unison.

Appendix

Noren: Traditional Japanese fabric curtains hung in doorways or windows

Naginata: A Japanese polearm with a curved blade, used by samurai, warrior monks, and notably onna-musha (female warriors).

Kubikirimaru: The name Yuki gave to her naginata. Roughly translates to "decapitate"

Oshugi: A custom to give money to a couple on their wedding day

Furoshiki: A large cloth used to wrap things for portability or protection. Bento boxes are often wrapped in furoshiki to keep the food clean, and also to absorb any spillage.

Nezumi-Kozo: A famous thief from the Edo era, dubbed "mouse boy". He would hide his face with a covering of cloth, tying the ends under his nose.

Imouto: Meaning, little sister. An Imouto game caters to those with particular fantasies.

Shime: A small ritual to tie up the ending of an event. Usually done by clapping or shouting something together.

Betsubara: Meaning "another stomach". There is a saying that all girls have a second stomach reserved for desserts. There is always room for dessert.

Okami: Lady in charge at a Ryokan (traditional Japanese Inn), or restaurant.